

or<sup>^</sup> their knowledge of mankind. But if, while everything unequivocally hostile to Christianity was kept silent in his company, there was nevertheless a latent impiety in possession of the heart, it would inevitably, however unobviously, infuse something of its spirit into the communications of such men. And, through the complacency which he felt in the high intellectual intercourse, some infection of the noxious element would insinuate its way into his own ideas and feelings. For it is hardly possible for the strongest and most vigilant mind, under the genial influence of eloquence, fancy, novelty, and bright intelligence, interchanged in amicable collision, to avoid admitting some effluvia (if I may so express it) breathing from the most interior quality of such associates, and tending to produce an insensible assimilation; especially if there should happen to be, in addition, a conciliating exterior of accomplishment, grace, and liberal manners. Thus the very predominance by which Johnson could repress the direct irreligion of statesmen, scholars, wits, and accomplished men of the world, might, by retaining him their intimate or frequent associate, subject him to meet the influence of that irreligion acting in a manner too indirect and refined to excite either hostility or caution.

But indeed if his caution was excited, there might still be a possibility of self-deception in the case. The great achievement and conscious merit of upholding, by his authority, a certain standard of good principles among such men, and compelling an acquiescence at least, wherever he was present, might tend to make himself feel satisfied with that order of sentiments, though materially lower than the standard which his conscientious judgment must have adopted, if he had formed it under the advantage of long and thoughtful retirement and exemption from the influence of such associates. It would be difficult for him to confess to himself that what was high enough for a repressive domination over impiety, might yet be below the level of true Christianity. It is hard for a man to suspect himself deficient in that very thing in which he not only excels other men, but mends them. Nothing can well be more unfortunate for Christian attainments, even in point of right judgment, than to be habitually in society where a man will feel as if he held a saintly eminence of character in merely